

FOR THE CONGRESSIONAL RECORD

November 6, 2007

**Statement of Congressman Pete Stark
Supporting the Safety and Health of Children After Disasters**

MR. STARK: Madam Speaker, I rise today in strong support of legislation aimed at protecting children during and after disasters. Our current emergency management system is not prepared to meet the unique needs of children. The “Kids in Disasters Well-being, Safety, and Health Act” (H.R. 3495) represents major progress in fixing this unacceptable situation.

The most important role of government is protecting the health and welfare of families. This is a role that the government must not privatize, contract out, or provide only to the wealthy and well connected.

Unfortunately, as we all witnessed after Hurricane Katrina, the government failed miserably to protect the most vulnerable, particularly children. It is unclear to me whether this failure was the result negligence or incompetence. Perhaps it was the natural result of running a government using a radical ideology that believes government shouldn't work.

What is clear to me is that this body has an obligation to make sure government works and finds ways to help families get back on their feet after disasters. My home state of California is no stranger to disasters: earthquakes, fires, flooding, and mudslides- we've got it all. During the last several weeks, wildfires ravaged Southern California. Just after the worst of the fires, 1300 childcare centers were closed, affecting over 16,000 children. These are children of first responders, teachers, and others that have to get back to work to make sure that the community can rebuild.

We should know if we are doing enough to help these families. We should know if FEMA is doing a good job of assisting those childcare centers to reopen. We should know if we are doing a good job of helping missing children to locate their parents. Local communities and governments should have access to the information and resources they need to ensure that

children's needs are taken care of.

This bill will help to fill an enormous gap in our disaster preparedness system. There is currently no agency charged with safeguarding children in the aftermath of a disaster or coordinating the efforts of various levels of government. This bill will begin to close this gap by establishing a National Resource Center for Federal, State, local, and tribal governments as well as NGOs to use to address the needs of children before, during, and after disasters. It will also establish a commission to examine our past failures and make specific recommendations on how to correct those.

Our children are looking to us to take action. I urge all of my colleagues to support this bill.